

Abstract 617

TITLE: Romance and Safer Sex: A Semi-Humorous Neuro-Literary Exploration

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ISSUE: The powerful influence of feelings of romance, love, and infatuation on thinking, judgment, and sexual behavior are widely known in American popular culture, but are under-appreciated by the public health community as variables affecting risky sexual behavior and therefore the transmission of STDs and HIV.

SETTING: Metaphoric, but plausible, connections are made between anatomic brain areas, literary devices, personals ads, self-psychology, and popular conceptions of love within a pharmacologic context.

PROJECT: The clinical and research neuropsychological literature, drug dissociation findings, principles of learning, romantic novels, song lyrics, advertisements for relationships in the personals sections of an alternative newspaper, conversations, and personal experience were synthesized over a period of years into multiple observations, several generalizations, and many questions.

RESULTS: In popular culture and personal belief, romance is generally regarded as effective in suppressing awareness, rational thinking, and judgment. The frontal lobes of the brain are metaphorically labeled as a major site of action and when cognitively impaired by romance, people tend to view potential sexual partners as the "one true love" who will make one "whole". [And how could such a wonderful person have an STD or HIV?] Perception and recall of cautionary messages from friends, former lovers, relatives, and public health officials is selectively blocked during this apparent non-drug induced dissociative state. Multiple doses of romance from novels and advertising also promote the idea that romantic sex is supposed to happen in a state of non-thinking unawareness and transport from reality to transcendence. It is only after romance has been reduced to below-threshold concentrations in the CNS that one notices the ugly socks the beloved wears and a more rational reappraisal of the relationship can occur. Awareness before and during sex then becomes more possible. Individual and cultural differences in sensitivity to romance exist; there are anecdotal reports of people thinking during the first sexual encounter.

LESSONS LEARNED: Literary, neuropharmacologic and drug dissociation metaphors may be helpful in bridging the gulf between scientific constructs of sexual behavior and the more subjective constructs of romance and sex that are common in American and other cultures. A broader understanding within public health of popular cultural beliefs and subjective realities governing love and sex, and their influence on sexual behavior and response to public health messages, may be helpful in crafting more comprehensive and salient programs for facilitating safer sex.

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